Comparing the ICS 213 Message form with the ARRL/ARES Message Form

History:

The forerunner of formal written radio messaging handling was the telegraph. It was extensively used by railroads, news agencies, Western Union, and the military up until when it was replaced by radio.

 The ARRL/AES format came from that tradition, and especially effective when messages had to be relayed over time and distance. The ARRL/ARES format is over 80 years old and has been used to communicate to the general public, to the Red Cross, to the Salvation Army, Blood Banks, Hospitals, over the National Traffic System (NTS), as Health and Welfare (W) traffic and to served agencies (Just remove the header and footer when delivering).

It worked well and still works well, if you know how to do it. IC-213 is the new kid on the block and is less suited for radio messaging. It goes without saying that if any agency requires a special format; that is the format that must be used. This is the reason why many agencies have modified the IC-213 and developed their own format within their own jurisdiction. If the message is to interface with the ICS, then at this time, and only then, is it best to use form 213.

Since most of our traffic will not be to FEMA, but rather within our area, we can discuss how to improve our ability to accurately and reliably handle written traffic transmitted over voice networks (pros and cons of message formats). For example, when does the address location, station of origin, word count, and precedence add to the value of the message? Nothing is set in concrete and message formats can and should be improved. What is, today, will surely change and be replaced; but a message format that has worked for over 150 years requires consideration

We learn through critical analysis

By discerning the differences between the ICS-213 message form and the ARRL/ARES Message form we may be able to better clarify their functional use and identify areas needed for improvement. ICS form 213 may be adequate in many situations; but from a field position it seems to fall sort in identifiable categories. It is designed as a bookkeeping device, to analyze the sequence of events, to keep track of costs, and for legal documentation. But as a radio message form, it lacks everything but simplicity.

Message Fields

Of course this is just my own opinion; and I do not speak from any position of authority; yet the weakness of the current ICS-213 message form should be recognized. There is much room for improvement if accuracy is valued. Most glaringly, is the l**ack of a time/date received stamp, the radio operator's tactical callsign and FCC callsign, a word count (check for accuracy), and location, when relevant. I**f no FCC callsign, then the radio operator's name should be written and/or tactical designator. It's important to know not only when the message was **originated,** but when it arrived (was received) at the destination or relay station. This is one advantage of utilizing the ARRL/ARES message form.

In a small disaster operation, where personnel and locations are well known, the **"TO" and "FROM" line numbered address locations** may not be needed. But when such are not well known, where there are multiple agencies involved, and/or the message is to travel outside the local area, a

numbered physical address/location may be necessary for reasons of efficiency and follow-up. Such should be the judgement call of the originator. Otherwise routing delays might occur. Replies or needed clarifications (so-called service messages) may be impossible. This is another advantage of the ARRL message form, whereas IC-213 lacks any location field.

Please note that the location, time, and date of the station of origin may differ from the location, time, and date of the "Signature" and/or "From" fields; which would be useful information. This indicates that there might have been a delay from the time and date the message was entered on the radio network and the signatory's origination.

Message Number
In the ARES format every message is assigned a **number** for easy reference and tracking. The number never changes after the originating station (and always the originating station) assigns the number, which stays with the message until it is delivered. Both the message number and station of origin allows for tracing and servicing the message.

Precedence
Although establishing a **"PRECEDENCE"** field may be controversial, we can all agree that a life threatening situation should be marked as the highest PRECEDENCE. Traditionally this has been symbolized by "E" for emergency precedence. E traffic should be handled first. The second precedence level is PRIORITY symbolized by the letter "P". There may be controversy here as to how to apply the "P" definition, but everyone agrees that Routine and Disaster Welfare traffic is to be given a lower precedence; whereas the assigning precedence is yet another advantage of using the ARRL message form.
EPWR are the message precedences. Precedences are there for a reason. The Ic-213 doesn't have room for it. We don't handle Routine (R) or W (Health and Welfare) until we clear the Emergency (E) and Priority (P) messages first. See the KaroEcho Field Operations Handbook for message handling regarding precedences.

Check or Word Count:
Today, digital communications can provide error checking (checks) to insure accuracy. In voice communications we have the **"CHECK"**, which is a word count. Granted, that using the check accurately is an advanced skill, but can be taught and learned by operators who wish to improve their skills and accuracy. Check (word count) can be an excellent method of catching errors. The word check, is yet another advantage of the standard ARRL message form.

ICS- form 213 was developed by bureaucrats, lawyers, and accountants along business organizational models, while sacrificing field operational needs. It should be used when serving an agency which demands it where conventional needs are dominant; but otherwise many RACES and ARES organizations have augmented ICS-213 with these enhanced optional features for their in-house needs.

Conclusion:
Compare ICS Message FORM-213 with the ARRL message form. In short, the ICS-213 message form can be improved by delineating additional fields, albeit optional.

In, "The Way of the Seal', Mark Divine, the author says "No plan survives contact with the enemy".

As an EmComm trained radio operator this means that all the concepts and models about organizational structures are void in an actual unmanageable situation... so one needs to be ready to

wing it and improvise, albeit with a sophisticated eye. That means, knowing when to ditch an outmoded method – when it becomes a hindrance.

NIMMS frms, the Incident Command Structure, ACS, RACES, ARES, and the ACS systems look great provided the situation is under control, contained, controllable, and none of the pieces of the system are compromised; but it does not apply under new and fast changing circumstances

Form IC-213 and the entire ICS structure is biased toward the accountant, lawyer, theoretician, and a business organizational structure that may well not be intact during the most critical 48 hours of a major disaster. Until the Calvary comes, we will have to innovate and base field operations on practicality and that involves winging it.